

ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – IV Issue -I (January- February) 2026

Frequency: Bimonthly



The Spirit Moves, But the Culture Holds: A Critical Hermeneutic Study of Women, Leadership, and Doctrine in Pentecostal Churches in Sierra Leone

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| **Received:** 23.01.2026 | **Accepted:** 28.01.2026 | **Published:** 07.02.2026

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Abstract

This study critically examines Pentecostal women's leadership in Sierra Leone, exploring how cultural norms, doctrinal teachings, and institutional hierarchies shape their experiences. Using a descriptive and critical hermeneutic lens grounded in phenomenology, it analyzes narratives of women leaders navigating gendered barriers while fostering alternative models of authority. Findings reveal how socio-demographic factors, relational leadership styles, and grassroots theological reinterpretations enable quiet subversion of patriarchal systems. The study highlights both the empowering and constraining dimensions of Pentecostalism, offering insights into women's agency and resilience within male-dominated ecclesiastical contexts. It calls for reimagining church leadership towards gender inclusivity.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; women's leadership; gender and religion; Sierra Leone; hermeneutics; African feminist theology

1. Introduction

Pentecostalism in Africa has often been celebrated for its vibrancy, inclusivity, and capacity to empower those historically marginalized in religious spaces. Its theological emphasis on the universality of the Holy Spirit's gifts, as captured in Acts 2:17, suggests a framework where leadership transcends gender, age, and social status. Yet, across many African societies, women's access to senior leadership within Pentecostal churches remains uneven and contested. This tension reflects deeper societal patterns where patriarchal structures, cultural expectations, and doctrinal interpretations converge to shape women's experiences in religious institutions (Oduyoye, 2021; Phiri, 2001)

Preliminary discussions with religious leaders shows that in Sierra Leone, Pentecostalism has grown rapidly in the wake of civil war and public health crises, positioning churches as spaces of healing, community rebuilding, and spiritual renewal. This expansion has also brought new opportunities for women to assume visible roles - as evangelists, intercessors, and ministry leaders. However, the extent to which these roles translate into access to pulpit leadership and institutional authority remains a critical question. This raises important considerations about how Pentecostal women navigate cultural constraints and doctrinal boundaries in a society marked

by complex gendered expectations.

Scholarly debates around Pentecostalism and gender highlight this paradox. While some researchers argue that Pentecostal spaces enable women to exercise spiritual authority and social influence (Chirongoma, 2006; Nadar, 2009), others point to persistent institutional and theological barriers (Dube, 2017; Ukah, 2016). African women's theology, particularly womanist perspectives, has called for critical re-readings of scripture and tradition (Oduyoye, 2021; Dube & Nadar, 2016). These debates suggest that the question is no longer whether women can lead, but rather how they lead in situations where their authority is often rendered conditional, contested, or invisible.

This study situates itself within these discussions, seeking to explore how Pentecostal women in Sierra Leone engage with cultural, doctrinal, and institutional dynamics that shape their leadership trajectories. It examines the intersection of socio-demographic factors such as age, marital status, and education with religious expectations, and considers how women employ strategies of resilience and adaptation within male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchies. In doing so, it interrogates the liberatory potential of Pentecostalism in a context where theological rhetoric on equality often sits uneasily alongside entrenched patriarchal practices.

The study adopts a descriptive and critical hermeneutic lens, grounded in phenomenology, to capture the complex interplay between personal agency and structural constraints. Hermeneutics, understood as the art of interpreting lived experiences and their embedded meanings (Zimmermann, 2012), offers a framework for engaging with Pentecostal women's narratives at both descriptive and critical levels. The approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how Pentecostal women leaders negotiate their roles in a religious tradition that is both empowering and limiting.

Study Objectives

This study seeks to critically examine the gendered dynamics of leadership within Pentecostal churches in Sierra Leone. It does so by situating women's leadership experiences at the intersection of cultural norms, doctrinal teachings, and institutional practices. By centering Sierra Leone within broader African and global discourses on gender and religion, the research seeks to contribute to conversations on how religious leadership can be re-imagined as a site of transformation and gender justice.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Interrogate the socio-demographic factors - including age, marital status, and education - that shape women's access to and experiences of leadership roles in Pentecostal churches.
2. Analyze social belief systems and cultural practices that influence perceptions of female leadership within Pentecostal communities, particularly in contexts where traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched.
3. Examine the doctrinal frameworks and hermeneutical approaches that have historically constrained women's participation in senior ecclesiastical roles and explore how these are being contested or reinterpreted in contemporary Pentecostalism.
4. Illuminate the lived experiences of Pentecostal women leaders, highlighting their strategies for negotiating institutional resistance, responding to stereotypes, and sustaining their ministries.

5. Assess the extent to which Pentecostal churches in Sierra Leone are evolving towards greater gender inclusivity, both theologically and structurally.

At the heart of this study lies the proposition that Pentecostalism in Sierra Leone embodies a dual reality for women: it offers theological and charismatic space for empowerment while simultaneously entrenching patriarchal structures that constrain full participation in church leadership. This tension reveals Pentecostalism as both a site of possibility and a space of negotiation for women seeking to exercise spiritual authority.

The study argues that Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women leaders - through their resilience, spiritual convictions, and relational strategies - actively engage in what may be termed a *reconstitutive praxis*. This involves reinterpreting doctrinal constraints, navigating cultural expectations, and reconfiguring ecclesiastical spaces to create room for alternative models of leadership.

By investigating these dynamics, the research positions Pentecostal women's leadership as a vital lens for understanding broader societal shifts in gender relations and the reimagining of religious authority in post-conflict Sierra Leone. It suggests that women's stories and strategies, though often overlooked, are critical to conceptualizing Pentecostalism as a force for holistic social renewal.

2. Literature Review

Pentecostalism's rapid rise in Africa has often been hailed as a democratizing religious force, celebrated for its emphasis on spiritual gifting and the priesthood of all believers. With its charismatic ethos and focus on direct divine empowerment, the movement appears to offer marginalized groups...avenues for leadership that transcend traditional hierarchies (Kalu, 2008; Oduyoye, 2021). Yet this promise of egalitarianism remains largely aspirational. Across African societies, Pentecostal churches have been found to replicate patriarchal structures that limit women's participation in senior ecclesiastical roles, even as they valorize women's contributions in auxiliary ministries and informal spiritual spaces (Marshall, 2009; Ukah, 2016).

Across Africa, research highlights a recurring pattern: women frequently lead vibrant fellowships, organize ministries, and spearhead social initiatives but are systematically excluded from decision-making spaces and pulpit leadership. Mapuranga's (2013) study of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism reveals this paradox. It observes that even highly visible women leaders often wield authority contingent on male endorsement or familial ties to church founders. Similar dynamics in Ghana and Nigeria reflect an uneasy balance between the empowerment rhetoric of charismatic Christianity and its embedded gender hierarchies.

These issues are not only confined to broader African situations. They also resonate strongly within Sierra Leone's Pentecostal churches. The country's gendered landscape, shaped by pre-colonial Sande/Bundo societies, colonial missionary interventions, and post-war reconstruction efforts, presents a complex backdrop against which women's leadership emerges. While Sierra Leonean women have historically played pivotal roles in peacebuilding and community organization, their visibility within formal church hierarchies remains limited. Cultural expectations often frame assertive women as rebellious, reinforcing a gendered order that confines women to supportive roles despite their evident spiritual authority.

A central mechanism of exclusion lies in the interpretation of scripture. Texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 have historically been deployed to silence women in church spaces. These verses are frequently treated as universal prohibitions, shaping institutional practices that restrict women’s preaching and leadership. Scholars argue that such interpretations reflect androcentric biases rather than inherent theological necessity. Oduyoye and Kanyoro (2019) call for hermeneutics rooted in African women’s experiences, while Westfall (2016) situates Pauline prohibitions within their historical context, arguing for culturally specific rather than prescriptive readings. These perspectives suggest that theological innovation could provide a pathway for greater inclusion, though such shifts often face resistance from entrenched institutional cultures.

Amid these constraints, African women in Pentecostal spaces have developed nuanced strategies of resistance and resilience. Nwoko (2021) identifies relational and service-oriented leadership styles as hallmarks of women’s engagement, emphasizing mentorship, community building, and spiritual nurturing as means of exercising influence. Such approaches align with findings across African Pentecostalism, where women leverage informal spaces - prayer cells, women’s fellowships, deliverance ministries - to assert spiritual authority, even as formal recognition eludes them (Bledsoe & Setterlund, 2015; Adu, 2019).

African feminist theological thought offers a critical framework for interrogating these dynamics. They advocate for theological constructions that affirm women’s lived realities (Phiri, 2014; Chirongoma & Phiri, 2019). Pioneered by scholars such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, this body of work critiques both Western feminist theology, which often fails to account for African cultural contexts, and African male-dominated theologies that universalize male experience. It centers themes of survival, community, and healing, advocating for theological constructions that affirm women’s lived realities (Phiri, 2019; Maparyan, 2020). Within Pentecostalism, this perspective exposes the gap between egalitarian rhetoric and institutional practice, challenging churches to move beyond tokenistic inclusion towards genuine structural reforms.

This theoretical orientation is particularly relevant in Sierra Leone, where women’s experiences of leadership are shaped by the intersections of age, marital status, education, and socio-economic positioning. African feminist theology illuminates how these intersecting identities influence women’s strategies of negotiation and reconstitution within male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchies. By centering women’s agency and resilience, it provides tools for analyzing how Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women craft alternative models of leadership rooted in service, relationality, and spiritual gifting, even in contexts resistant to change.

Despite these rich insights, notable gaps persist in existing scholarship. Much of the literature focuses on larger Pentecostal movements in Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, leaving Sierra Leone underexplored (Kalu, 2020; Frahm-Arp, 2018). Few studies employ critical phenomenological hermeneutics that foreground African women’s voices, strategies, and theological innovations. This absence risks perpetuating a homogenized narrative of African Pentecostalism that neglects localized strategies of resistance and reconstitution. Addressing these gaps requires a closer examination of how Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women negotiate doctrinal constraints, cultural expectations, and

institutional politics to reshape their religious and social worlds.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, narrative research design to explore the complex and nuanced experiences of women leaders in Pentecostal churches across Sierra Leone. The approach aligns with descriptive and critical hermeneutics, rooted in phenomenology, centering African women’s voices and lived realities in situations where patriarchal religious and cultural structures remain deeply entrenched. This theoretical framing draws on Gadamer’s (1975) hermeneutics that emphasize the fusion of horizons between the women’s lived experiences and the researcher’s interpretive context. The approach enables both a faithful description of women’s lived experiences and a critical interrogation of the cultural and doctrinal frameworks shaping them.

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

The research was underpinned by a phenomenological and biographical approach, chosen for its capacity to capture the depth and richness of participants’ spiritual and leadership journeys. This methodology was particularly suited to analyzing how Pentecostal women leaders navigate sociocultural, doctrinal, and institutional constraints over time (Phiri, 2019; Maparyan, 2020).

The theoretical framing drew heavily on descriptive and critical hermeneutics informed by phenomenology, enabling both interpretation and critique of the cultural and theological dynamics under study. It also aligns with Womanism, which emphasizes survival, community, and the agency of Black and African women, while reconstitutive praxis examines how these women reinterpret theological and institutional frameworks to create alternative spaces for empowerment. This dual lens provided a critical foundation for understanding how Pentecostal women’s leadership emerges in Sierra Leone’s unique post-conflict and post-colonial context.

Study Setting and Context

Fieldwork was conducted in Sierra Leone, a country where Pentecostalism has seen exponential growth, particularly in urban centers such as Freetown, Bo, and Makeni. These locations reflect diverse denominational expressions of Pentecostalism, including classical Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal congregations. The chosen settings allowed for a comparative analysis of urban and peri-urban dynamics, capturing variations in cultural norms and ecclesiastical practices across different church contexts.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 20 Pentecostal women leaders occupying varied leadership roles, including senior pastors, evangelists, ministry heads, and district coordinators. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 62 years and represented a spectrum of marital statuses and educational backgrounds, reflecting the intersections of demographic factors that influence women’s access to and experiences of leadership. The inclusion criteria prioritized women who had held leadership roles for a minimum of five years, ensuring a depth of experience sufficient to address the study’s research objectives.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between February and April 2025 and comprised in-depth semi-structured interviews and two focus

group discussions (FGDs). Interviews explored key themes such as leadership journeys, doctrinal and cultural barriers, implicit biases and stereotypes, support systems, and personal coping strategies. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in English or Krio, depending on participant preference. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The FGDs provided a collective space for women leaders to share experiences, compare strategies, and reflect on common challenges. This method enriched the data by uncovering shared narratives and points of divergence in participants' accounts, especially regarding denominational and regional variations in gendered church practices.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used throughout the study, and sensitive information - particularly relating to church politics and marital status - was approached with cultural sensitivity and respect.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis guided the analytical process, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Transcripts were read multiple times for immersion, and initial codes were developed inductively to capture emerging patterns. These codes were then organized into broader themes aligned with the study's objectives.

Our analytical and interpretative framework nudges us to move from descriptive to critical hermeneutics, a process that allows for a focus on how Pentecostal women leaders' lived experiences illuminate both the enabling and constraining aspects of Pentecostal theology and cultural practices. This approach aligns with Ricoeur's (1976) emphasis on moving from naïve description to critical interpretation and creates an interpretative terrain where women's narratives both reveal and question the doctrinal and cultural structures shaping them.

Limitations

As with all qualitative studies, this research is context-specific and not designed for broad generalizability. The purposive sampling of Pentecostal women leaders means findings reflect the experiences of a select group and may not represent all denominations or regional contexts in Sierra Leone. Additionally, the sensitivity of discussing gender and leadership within church settings may have influenced participants' willingness to speak openly about institutional challenges.

4. Findings

This section explores the lived experiences of Pentecostal women leaders in Sierra Leone, organized around key themes that emerged from interviews and focus group discussions. These themes reflect how socio-demographic factors, cultural expectations, doctrinal teachings, and personal resilience intersect to shape women's leadership trajectories. Each theme reveals the paradoxical nature of Pentecostal spaces - sites of potential empowerment yet constrained by patriarchal norms and selective theological interpretations.

The analysis focuses women's narratives, not merely as reflections of constraint but as testimonies of agency, negotiation, and resilience. By examining these accounts through a descriptive and critical hermeneutic lens, grounded in phenomenology, the findings highlight how Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women leaders navigate systemic barriers while fostering inclusive leadership models that subtly challenge and reconfigure male-dominated ecclesiastical structures.

As the themes unfold, each quotation is analyzed in depth to demonstrate how individual stories both illuminate and complicate broader theoretical and sociological insights on gender and Pentecostalism in African contexts. This approach situates the women's voices within larger discourses, while also evaluating their implications for understanding power, resistance, and transformation in religious institutions. It is a hermeneutic sensitivity resonates with Thiselton's (2015) assertion that doctrine is best understood not as static truth but as dynamic interpretive practice within lived contexts

Theme 1: Socio-Demographic Influences

The pathways into Pentecostal leadership for women in Sierra Leone are profoundly shaped by socio-demographic factors such as age, marital status, and education. These variables serve as both enablers and constraints, defining how women are perceived and how far they can advance within ecclesiastical hierarchies.

A district team leader supervising over 300 churches reflected: *"If I was not educated, I would have found it very difficult. Education made it possible for me to fit into such a position"* (Respondent 14). This statement reveals the centrality of formal education in providing women with legitimacy and operational competence within Pentecostal structures. The respondent's narrative highlights how education functions as a tool for self-confidence and public speaking. However, this privileging of education may also inadvertently reinforce exclusions for less formally educated women, and may reveal Pentecostal leadership as not merely a matter of spiritual calling but also of socio-cultural capital.

Similarly, another pastor noted: *"My education has given me confidence and the ability to speak boldly and manage church programs. It has also helped me to read and understand the Bible more deeply"* (Respondent 2). This example affirms how educational attainment enhances interpretative skills and theological literacy, empowering women to navigate doctrinal debates and institutional challenges. Yet the quote also suggests that education alone does not dismantle entrenched patriarchal attitudes, as leadership roles for women remain contested even among the highly educated. This duality illustrates the intersection of education with gendered expectations, reflecting the paradox of Pentecostalism as both empowering and limiting for women.

Contrastingly, other respondents downplayed the significance of formal education. As one leader stated: *"Leadership in church doesn't necessarily rely on education. It's more about your spiritual gifts and how active you are in church life"* (Respondent 4). This narrative situates spiritual charisma and dedication as alternative pathways into leadership, challenging notions that privilege formal qualifications. It points to the charismatic ethos of Pentecostalism, where the Spirit's anointing is said to transcend worldly hierarchies. However, the lived reality often betrays this theological ideal, as women without formal education may still struggle to ascend beyond auxiliary roles.

Marital status emerges as another pivotal factor, shaping

perceptions of women's maturity, respectability, and authority. A ministry head observed: *"Being married adds to my respectability in the eyes of the church"* (Respondent 3). Here, marriage operates as a social marker of stability and moral authority, affording women leaders a degree of institutional trust and acceptance. Yet this privileging of marital status reinforces heteronormative assumptions that equate womanhood with wifehood, sidelining unmarried or divorced women irrespective of their spiritual calling or competence.

This exclusionary dynamic is evident in the account of a divorced pastor who lamented: *"Because of my current status, I cannot lead a big church. Society finds it difficult to accept you, being a pastor yet not married. Out of 100%, only 3% respect you"* (Respondent 15). Her experience highlights the double burden of gender and marital stigma, where leadership capacity is judged through a moralistic lens that polices women's private lives.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate how socio-demographic factors function as both scaffolds and barriers in Pentecostal women's leadership journeys. While education and marriage can confer legitimacy, they also reinforce exclusionary hierarchies that marginalize single, divorced, and less-educated women..

Theme 2: Perceptions of Women in Leadership

Perceptions of women in leadership within Sierra Leonean Pentecostal churches reveal an ambivalent landscape that oscillates between affirmation and implicit restriction. While some congregations celebrate female leadership as divinely sanctioned, others reinforce gendered hierarchies that confine women to supportive or auxiliary roles. These perceptions are shaped by broader cultural narratives and theological interpretations, which produce uneven experiences for Pentecostal women leaders.

In churches where female leadership is visibly embraced, women testify to a sense of divine validation and institutional support. As one assistant pastor observed: *"Our church believes in women in leadership - we are living examples. When God calls a woman, she must rise"* (Respondent 6). This affirmation reflects a theological openness grounded in Pentecostalism's emphasis on the universality of spiritual gifts. It also shows how congregations that embrace women's leadership align their praxis with charismatic theology, and recognize the Spirit's agency beyond gendered boundaries. However, such narratives also highlight their exceptionality; they exist as islands of inclusivity in an otherwise restrictive ecclesiastical sea. This raises critical questions about sustainability - whether these spaces represent structural change or temporary accommodations within patriarchal systems.

Conversely, other respondents described gendered segregation of roles that limits women's leadership to spheres considered "appropriate" for their gender. One ministry head articulated this dynamic: *"Women are respected when they lead other women or children. But we are not allowed to preach to the whole church. Leadership is seen as supportive, not spiritual authority"* (Respondent 3). This perception reflects a widespread theological and cultural belief that confines women's influence to nurturing and caregiving roles. Such compartmentalization suggests that while Pentecostalism's charismatic practices may empower women at the grassroots level, institutional recognition of their authority remains fraught.

Even in congregations where progress has been made, hesitations persist. As one respondent noted: *"Some still find it strange to see women in authority, though a few women have managed to break*

through those old views" (Respondent 5). This statement suggests the fragility of women's leadership gains, which remain vulnerable to backlash and reliant on individual charisma or exceptional circumstances. The phrase "managed to break through" evokes images of resistance and negotiation; it suggests that access to leadership is not institutionalized but contingent - often achieved at significant personal cost.

Collectively, these narratives reveal a Pentecostal landscape marked by partial inclusivity. While individual congregations may support women's leadership, institutional cultures often retain gendered biases that circumscribe women's authority. This duality reinforces the paradox identified in the study's central thesis: Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women leaders are empowered by the Spirit yet constrained by cultural and doctrinal expectations.

Theme 3: Cultural and Social Norms

Cultural and social norms in Sierra Leone act as powerful forces that shape, and often limit, women's leadership in Pentecostal churches. These norms are embedded in broader societal expectations about gender roles, which the church both reflects and reinforces. As such, women leaders must navigate a landscape where cultural respectability politics intersect with doctrinal interpretations, complicating their access to and exercise of authority.

One respondent articulated the depth of this cultural entrenchment: *"Our culture favors male dominance, and it shows in how leadership is approached - even in church"* (Respondent 4). This observation situates the church as a mirror of Sierra Leonean society, where patriarchal structures are pervasive. The phrase "even in church" underscores the irony that sacred spaces, often seen as sites of liberation, reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to transcend.

Another leader echoed this sentiment by highlighting how assertive women are perceived: *"Even outside the church, assertive women are sometimes called disrespectful. That thinking follows us into church spaces"* (Respondent 9). Here, cultural narratives about femininity - valorizing submissiveness and discouraging assertiveness - slip seamlessly into ecclesiastical contexts. This quote illustrates how women leaders carry a double burden: they must demonstrate competence without appearing confrontational, a balancing act that limits their ability to exercise full authority. This dynamic links back to Theme 2, where women's leadership was shown to be contingent and fragile, often tolerated only within narrowly defined parameters.

Yet resistance to these cultural constraints is not absent. Some women leaders have developed strategies to empower others within these restrictive environments. One pastor described her efforts: *"We create social activities for women so they can see themselves as leaders, regardless of their positions. We don't limit them to traditional roles"* (Respondent 13). This approach represents a subtle but significant act of reconstitution - reshaping church spaces to foster women's agency without directly challenging entrenched hierarchies. It reflects the relational and nurturing leadership styles identified in Nwoko's (2021) work on African women clergy.

These narratives highlight how cultural and social norms act as both barriers and catalysts for women's leadership in Sierra Leonean Pentecostalism. They reinforce gendered hierarchies yet also provoke creative strategies of resistance and empowerment.

Theme 4: Doctrine and Biblical Justifications

Doctrinal interpretations within Pentecostal churches in Sierra Leone occupy a pivotal role in shaping women's leadership experiences. These interpretations serve as both theological gatekeepers and potential catalysts for change, depending on how biblical texts are read and applied. The paradox of Pentecostal theology - its egalitarian rhetoric versus its patriarchal implementation - becomes especially visible in this domain.

For many women, biblical narratives of female leaders provide inspiration and a theological foundation for their roles. As one pastor affirmed: *"The Bible supports women in leadership. Look at Deborah, a judge and prophetess. Look at Esther, who saved a nation"* (Respondent 6). This statement reflects an interpretive strategy that showcases female biblical figures as precedents for contemporary leadership. It challenges narrow readings of scripture that marginalize women, instead emphasizing narratives where women acted decisively in public and spiritual spheres. Such interpretations align with African feminist theological thought, which calls for context-sensitive readings that center women's lived realities (Oduyoye, 1995; Kanyoro, 2002). However, this perspective also exposes the unevenness of doctrinal literacy across congregations, where not all members are receptive to such re-readings.

Contrastingly, other respondents highlighted the persistence of restrictive interpretations, particularly of Pauline texts. One ministry head lamented: *"Verses like 'women should be silent in the church' are quoted to say we can't preach. Leadership roles are mostly given to men, even when women are capable"* (Respondent 3). This illustrates how selective scriptural literalism functions as a mechanism of exclusion, reinforcing gender hierarchies under the guise of theological fidelity. The recurrence of such interpretations suggests that doctrinal barriers are deeply embedded in church practices and resistant to change. Evaluating this dynamic reveals a critical tension: while Pentecostalism's charismatic emphasis theoretically disrupts hierarchies, its institutional structures often reproduce them through patriarchal hermeneutics.

Yet, the presence of alternative readings signals a growing theological contestation within some congregations. Another respondent pointed out: *"Deborah's leadership in the Bible is evidence that women can lead"* (Respondent 14). This invocation of Deborah not only challenges traditionalist views but also asserts women's right to occupy leadership spaces as a matter of biblical faithfulness. It shows how Pentecostal women leaders, even without formal theological training, engage in grassroots hermeneutics - interpreting scripture through the lens of their experiences and spiritual callings.

These doctrinal negotiations reveal the complex interplay between scripture, culture, and institutional power. While restrictive readings continue to shape exclusionary practices, alternative hermeneutics offer glimpses of possibility for a more inclusive Pentecostalism.

Theme 5: Leadership Experiences and Styles

The leadership styles of Pentecostal women in Sierra Leone reveal a distinct emphasis on relationality, humility, and inclusivity. These styles are not accidental but emerge as strategic responses to institutional and cultural constraints. By leading through relationships and service rather than command and control, women

craft alternative models of authority that align with Pentecostal spirituality while subtly challenging male-dominated hierarchies.

One pastor described her leadership approach: *"My leadership style is more nurturing and inclusive. I focus on empowering others rather than commanding them"* (Respondent 2). This statement conveys a conscious departure from hierarchical and authoritarian leadership models often valorized in ecclesiastical spaces. Instead, the respondent spotlights empowerment and inclusion, embodying a form of "soft power" that builds trust and community.

Another respondent emphasized the role of humility in her ministry: *"Being humble to every single member and listening to children with their problems - that has shaped my leadership style"* (Respondent 13). Here, humility is not framed as passive submission but as an active, ethical choice that fosters deep relational bonds within the congregation. However, it also raises critical questions about whether such styles inadvertently reinforce gendered stereotypes of women as natural caregivers, potentially limiting their recognition as authoritative leaders.

Resilience also emerged as a defining characteristic of these women's leadership journeys. As one young leader recounted: *"Facing rejection early in my church life made me resilient. I had to learn to push through criticism and prove my value quietly"* (Respondent 4). This narrative illustrates how persistence and adaptability become crucial survival skills for women navigating male-dominated ecclesiastical structures. The phrase "prove my value quietly" signals a strategic modesty - asserting competence in ways that avoid direct confrontation with patriarchal expectations.

Together, these accounts depict a Pentecostal leadership landscape where women innovate within constraints. Their styles - grounded in nurturing, humility, and resilience - challenge the assumption that effective leadership must be hierarchical and masculine. Instead, they embody a gendered reimagining of authority that prioritizes community and care while subtly subverting exclusionary norms. This reimagining is not without its limitations but represents a critical site of transformation within Sierra Leonean Pentecostalism.

Theme 6: Barriers and Stereotypes

Despite their evident spiritual gifts and leadership competence, Pentecostal women in Sierra Leone continue to encounter entrenched barriers and stereotypes that undermine their authority. These barriers often take the form of unspoken institutional norms, whispered criticisms, and doctrinal justifications that confine women to supportive rather than directive roles.

As one respondent noted: *"Some people will lie about women being proud, loose, and more. Before electing a woman, unnecessary issues rise just to cry them down"* (Respondent 1). This statement reveals how women leaders are subjected to character attacks framed as moral failings - accusations of pride or looseness - aimed at delegitimizing their leadership. These gendered critique reflect cultural anxieties about women in positions of authority as well as function as tools of gatekeeping within Pentecostal hierarchies. Evaluating this dynamic draws attention to how moralistic discourses are weaponized to discipline women's ambition, and how this reinforces the perception that leadership is an inherently masculine domain.

Another leader echoed similar sentiments about gendered

stereotypes: *“Some believe women are too emotional to lead. This mindset doesn’t disappear easily”* (Respondent 5). Here, emotionality is constructed as a disqualifying trait, and it perpetuates the stereotype that women lack the rationality and stability required for leadership. This narrative shows how essentialist gender beliefs are embedded in ecclesiastical cultures, constraining women’s advancement even in congregations that publicly espouse egalitarian theology.

However, not all congregations perpetuate these biases. One respondent described her church as an exception: *“We don’t have biases in our ministry. We give everyone equal rights to lead as long as they are committed to the work of God”* (Respondent 12). This account offers a glimpse of institutional cultures where gender is de-emphasized in favor of spiritual commitment. While encouraging, such egalitarian spaces remain rare and fragile, often contingent on the disposition of individual male leaders or localized church cultures. This finding highlights intra-denominational diversity in Sierra Leonean Pentecostalism, suggesting that change is possible but uneven.

These contrasting experiences reveal a Pentecostal landscape where stereotypes and barriers persist as formidable obstacles to women’s leadership. They also point up the double labor demanded of female leaders: they must not only perform their ministerial duties but also continuously negotiate and resist gendered scrutiny. This struggle for recognition and legitimacy lays the foundation for exploring the more rewarding aspects of women’s leadership journeys, addressed in the final theme.

Theme 7: Rewards and Recognition

Amidst cultural constraints and institutional challenges, Pentecostal women leaders in Sierra Leone derive profound rewards from their ministries. These rewards are more than merely material or positional. They are deeply rooted in spiritual fulfillment, relational bonds, and the recognition they receive from their congregations. Such affirmations often serve as counterweights to the pervasive stereotypes and barriers outlined in earlier themes.

One respondent reflected on the emotional resonance of her leadership role: *“People now call me woman of God, and that makes me feel like I have attained something in this life”* (Respondent 1). For a leader navigating patriarchal church structures, being addressed as “woman of God” signifies not only individual achievement but also communal affirmation of her legitimacy. Yet, such titles may also mask underlying gendered tensions, raising questions about whether they signal genuine institutional acceptance or remain symbolic gestures within unchanged systems.

Mentorship and the empowerment of younger women also emerged as key sources of fulfillment. As one leader explained: *“Seeing young women gain confidence to serve boldly in the church brings me joy”* (FGD participant). This narrative highlights the relational dimension of leadership, where success is measured not by personal elevation but by the capacity to nurture future generations. It reflects a womanist ethic of communal care and transformation and suggests that female leaders envision their roles as catalysts for collective empowerment rather than solitary achievement. This approach ties directly to the nurturing leadership styles discussed in Theme 5, and points up how relational models can generate long-term cultural shifts within church spaces.

Material and social rewards, while less common, were noted by

some respondents as meaningful markers of appreciation. One leader shared: *“The respect alone gave me so much joy and gifts I received from the congregation as a leader”* (Respondent 13). Here, tangible rewards function as acts of public endorsement that bolster a woman’s social standing within the community. This recognition, however, remains precarious in environments where women’s leadership is not structurally protected. They point back to the fragility of gains noted in Theme 2 (Perceptions of Women in Leadership).

Collectively, these accounts reveal that rewards for Pentecostal women leaders are multi-layered. They encompass spiritual, relational, and symbolic dimensions. They suggest that even within constrained spaces, women find ways to reframe their leadership as meaningful and impactful. Yet these rewards also draw attention to a persisting paradox: they are deeply fulfilling but often insufficient to dismantle the institutional barriers and gendered stereotypes that continue to challenge women’s full inclusion.

5. Discussion of findings

This study reveals the paradoxical realities of Pentecostal women’s leadership in Sierra Leone. While Pentecostalism’s theology of spiritual gifting theoretically provides space for women’s empowerment, cultural expectations, doctrinal interpretations, and institutional hierarchies continue to constrain their leadership trajectories.

The findings show that socio-demographic factors such as education, marital status, and age play a double-edged role - conferring legitimacy in some contexts while reinforcing exclusion in others. Perceptions of women in leadership remain ambivalent, with some congregations embracing female authority as divinely sanctioned and others restricting women to supportive or auxiliary roles.

Cultural norms perpetuate gendered hierarchies, framing assertive women as rebellious or disrespectful, while doctrinal interpretations - especially of Pauline texts - serve as theological gatekeepers to leadership. Despite these constraints, women leaders deploy relational, nurturing, and resilient leadership styles, carving out spaces of influence through mentorship and communal care.

Persistent barriers include stereotypes of women as “too emotional” or morally unfit to lead, yet participants also report profound spiritual and social rewards, including community recognition and the empowerment of younger women. These findings depict a Pentecostal landscape where women engage in acts of subtle resistance and reconstitution, negotiating constrained spaces with creativity and faith.

The findings converge significantly with existing literature on Pentecostalism, gender, and leadership in African contexts. They affirm scholarly observations that Pentecostal churches often present a paradoxical landscape for women: a space of empowerment in rhetoric yet constraint in practice. Like prior studies in Nigeria, Ghana, and Zimbabwe, this research highlights how institutional hierarchies and patriarchal interpretations of scripture persistently shape women’s experiences of leadership, even within charismatic traditions that emphasize the universality of the Holy Spirit’s gifts (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2019; Mapuranga, 2013).

The role of socio-demographic factors in facilitating or constraining women’s leadership also echoes findings from other

African settings. In line with Mwaura's (2015) work, this study shows how marital status and age confer legitimacy on female leaders, while their absence - particularly in cases of unmarried or divorced women - renders them vulnerable to suspicion and marginalization. Similarly, the emphasis on formal education as an enabler of confidence, theological literacy, and administrative competence aligns with observations by Bledsoe and Setterlund (2015) about the importance of educational and social capital in African church leadership.

Doctrinal constraints, particularly interpretations of Pauline texts, remain a critical point of convergence. As noted in the literature (Phiri, 2019; Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 2019), these texts are often used to justify the exclusion of women from preaching and pastoral roles. Respondents' experiences in Sierra Leone mirror this pattern, where verses like "women should be silent in the church" are deployed to legitimize gendered hierarchies, even in congregations otherwise open to women's participation.

The findings also resonate with Nwoko's (2021) insights on relational and nurturing leadership styles as strategies of resistance. Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women leaders similarly emphasize humility, community building, and mentorship - approaches that allow them to exercise influence within male-dominated structures without directly challenging institutional norms.

Finally, the persistence of gendered stereotypes - such as women being "too emotional" or morally suspect - reinforces broader sociological observations about African religious institutions as sites where gendered moral economies are policed and reproduced (Chitando & Biri, 2016; Wariboko, 2014). This convergence highlights the structural nature of women's marginalization in Pentecostalism and situates Sierra Leonean women's experiences within a wider African religious landscape marked by both empowerment and exclusion.

However, while this study aligns with much of the existing scholarship on women and Pentecostalism, it also diverges in critical ways that illuminate the specificity of the Sierra Leonean context and add fresh dimensions to the discourse.

First, the findings complicate the assumption, present in studies like Asamoah-Gyadu (2019), that Pentecostalism's emphasis on charisma and spiritual gifts uniformly levels the playing field for women. While participants acknowledged the empowering rhetoric of spiritual gifting, their lived experiences revealed how this rhetoric often masks enduring institutional hierarchies. Unlike Asamoah-Gyadu's optimistic framing of Pentecostalism as inherently inclusive, Sierra Leonean women's narratives accentuate the fragility of such inclusivity, which remains contingent on denominational culture and individual male leaders' dispositions.

Second, the study introduces a more nuanced understanding of the role of education in women's leadership trajectories. While existing literature tend to education as an unqualified enabler of women's authority, the findings here reveal a dual dynamic. For some respondents, education was empowering, enhancing their confidence and theological literacy. Yet for others, particularly those without formal education, spiritual maturity and active participation were seen as equally valid pathways to leadership. This challenges education-centered models of empowerment and emphasizes Pentecostalism's charismatic ethos as a counterbalance, albeit inconsistently applied.

Third, the findings diverge from Oduyoye and Kanyoro's (2019)

womanist theology in their treatment of resistance. While womanist scholars celebrate overt acts of resistance and confrontation, Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women often adopt more subtle strategies - relational leadership, humility, and quiet resilience - to negotiate patriarchal barriers. This portrays a contextual pragmatism where overt challenges could risk social ostracism or institutional backlash. It suggests a form of "quiet subversion" that, while less visible, is no less transformative within its constrained context.

Finally, the narratives in this study reveal greater intra-denominational diversity in women's experiences than previously documented. Whereas Mapuranga (2013) and Mwaura (2015) describe Pentecostal churches as broadly ambivalent towards women's leadership, this research uncovers congregations that have moved toward genuine inclusivity, alongside others where gendered hierarchies remain entrenched. This variation brings out the importance of localized, congregation-level analyses in understanding gendered religious dynamics.

These points of divergence highlight the distinctiveness of Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women's experiences while exposing gaps in existing scholarship. They signal the need to move beyond broad generalizations about African Pentecostalism to a more granular understanding of how local cultural, historical, and denominational contexts shape gendered leadership dynamics. Building on these divergences, this study contributes several new insights that deepen and expand theoretical and empirical conversations on women, religion, and agency in African contexts. These include:

1. *Quiet Subversion as a Leadership Strategy*

A key contribution lies in identifying *quiet subversion* as a distinct strategy employed by Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women leaders. Unlike more overt forms of resistance documented in prior studies (e.g., Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 2019), participants here demonstrate how relationality, humility, and resilience become tools for negotiating patriarchal barriers. For instance, leadership styles described as "nurturing and inclusive" (Respondent 2) and the conscious practice of "being humble to every single member" (Respondent 13) suggest that women are crafting alternative paradigms of authority that subtly reconfigure male-dominated church spaces without provoking direct institutional confrontation. This finding foregrounds the creativity and pragmatism embedded in women's leadership practices within constrained environments.

2. *Intersectionality of Exclusion*

The study highlights the complex intersections of age, marital status, education, and gender in shaping access to Pentecostal leadership. While prior scholarship often treats these variables in isolation, this research draws attention to how they compound exclusion. The account of a divorced pastor ("*Because of my current status, I cannot lead a big church. Out of 100%, only 3% respect you*" - Respondent 15) illustrates how moralistic judgments about marital status intersect with cultural and institutional biases to undermine women's legitimacy. This intersectional lens challenges monolithic representations of female exclusion and points to the need for more nuanced analyses of women's ecclesiastical experiences.

3. *Intra-Denominational Diversity and Localized Innovation*

Unlike studies that frame African Pentecostal churches as uniformly ambivalent toward women's leadership (e.g.,

Mapuranga, 2013), this study uncovers significant variation between congregations in Sierra Leone. Some churches display entrenched gender hierarchies, while others actively create spaces for women's empowerment and theological innovation. The account of a pastor mentoring young women to "see themselves as leaders, regardless of their positions" (Respondent 13) exemplifies such localized efforts. This insight calls for a shift from national or denominational analyses to congregation-level studies that capture these micro-variations in gender dynamics.

4. Rewards as Sources of Agency and Validation

This study also sheds light on how spiritual and social rewards function as counterweights to systemic exclusion. Recognition through titles such as "woman of God" (Respondent 1) and the joy of mentoring younger women (Respondent 20) highlight how affirmation from congregants reinforces women's sense of purpose and authority. These rewards, while not dismantling institutional barriers, offer symbolic and relational capital that women leaders leverage to sustain their ministries. This dynamic nuances discussions of empowerment by showing how agency can flourish even in partial and fragile spaces.

5. Descriptive and critical hermeneutic Lens as Methodological Innovation

Finally, This study demonstrates the value of a descriptive and critical hermeneutic approach, rooted in phenomenology, for analyzing women's religious leadership. This methodological shift emphasizes not only the interpretation of women's narratives but also their critical engagement with theological and institutional discourses. As Fiorenza (2017) argues, hermeneutics must engage with the power dynamics embedded in interpretive traditions, making visible the gendered exclusions often hidden in theological discourses. By centering lived experiences and emphasizing the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints, this methodology uncovers hidden acts of resistance and transformation often overlooked in traditional sociological or theological studies.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for further inquiry into the gendered dynamics of leadership within Pentecostalism and broader African religious milieus. First, future research could explore male perspectives on female leadership to understand how male leaders and congregants perceive and engage with women's authority. Such insights could illuminate institutional resistances and potential allies in fostering gender-inclusive church practices.

Second, comparative studies across rural and urban congregations in Sierra Leone could deepen understanding of how geographical location shapes women's leadership experiences. Rural settings may present unique cultural and doctrinal challenges - or opportunities - that differ from urban Pentecostal spaces.

Third, longitudinal studies tracking women's leadership trajectories over time could provide valuable insights into how sustained participation influences institutional cultures and whether localized acts of resistance translate into structural change.

Fourth, examining theological training curricula and practices in Sierra Leone could reveal how future church leaders are socialized into gendered norms and whether interventions at this level might disrupt exclusionary traditions.

Finally, comparative regional studies across West Africa could contextualize Sierra Leone's experiences within broader patterns

and variations, offering a richer understanding of Pentecostalism's gendered dimensions in diverse cultural and denominational landscapes.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex and contested terrain of Pentecostal women's leadership in Sierra Leone. It reveals how women called to ministry inhabit a paradoxical space: they are anointed by the Spirit yet constrained by cultural expectations, doctrinal interpretations, and institutional hierarchies. While Pentecostalism's theology of spiritual gifting offers a rhetoric of inclusivity, its practical outworking remains uneven, and reflects persisting patriarchal structures within African Christianity.

The narratives of Sierra Leonean Pentecostal women leaders points up that empowerment in these situations is rarely absolute. Instead, it emerges as a negotiated process marked by resilience, relationality, and quiet subversion. Through nurturing leadership styles, mentoring younger women, and reinterpreting scripture for inclusion, these leaders craft alternative spaces of authority that challenge male-dominated ecclesiastical cultures from within. Their experiences affirm that agency in patriarchal religious systems is not always loud or confrontational; it can also take the form of subtle, everyday acts of resistance that cumulatively shift cultural and institutional norms.

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